DAWN

OPINION

Gaza second phase

MORE than three months since the ceasefire in Gaza took effect, the second phase of President Donald Trump's peace plan for the occupied Palestinian territory has been launched. Among the features of this phase is the announcement of the so-called Gaza 'Board of Peace', which the American leader will head. Other luminaries serving on this body include his son-in-law Jared Kushner, administration staffers Marco Rubio and Steve Witkoff and former British prime minister Tony Blair, among others. In Mr Trump's own words, this "is the Greatest and Most Prestigious Board ever assembled". Meanwhile, a serving American general has been named to head the International Stabilisation Force, which is supposed to oversee security and disarmament in Gaza, while Ali Shaath, an ex-Palestinian Authority official, is to head the Gaza governance committee.

All the hyperbole notwithstanding, it remains to be seen whether these interim governing structures will succeed in addressing the still dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, and stopping Israel from committing more slaughter in the Strip. While Tel Aviv had butchered over 70,000 Palestinians since Oct 7, 2023, more than 400 people have been murdered in Gaza by Israel since the ceasefire took effect. Moreover, Israel continues to occupy the Palestinian territory. There are also questions about how much liberty the Palestinian committee will have in running Gaza's affairs. There are genuine fears that the foreign-led Board of Peace — in true colonial fashion — will be making the actual decisions that matter, with little to no Palestinian input, seeking to protect Israel's interests over all else. Interestingly, the board's goals include bringing "investment attraction" to and initiating "capital mobilisation" in Gaza. Rather than a humanitarian effort, this sounds more like a business deal. Also, the inclusion of Tony Blair in the board has raised eyebrows. As UK prime minister, Mr Blair was an enthusiastic supporter of America's devastating invasion of Iraq. It should be remembered that Iraq has yet to fully recover from that disaster.

As for the ISF, its mandate is still unclear. Will the force, led by an American general and consisting of troops from Muslim countries, take Hamas's weapons by force if the Palestinian group refuses to give up its guns? Will Muslim states be willing to participate in such an endeavour? Pakistan, and other states that are mulling sending troops, must consider these scenarios. The fact is that the plan is a temporary fix at best, and a cover for permanent Israeli occupation at worst. If there is to be lasting peace in Gaza and the rest of the occupied territories, then the question of Palestinian liberation must be addressed in unambiguous terms. A clear roadmap is needed, which leads to the end of the Zionist occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Failed power reform

NEPRA'S latest state of the industry report tells the familiar story of failed reform in the power sector due to patchy execution, misgovernance, corruption, underinvestment, and unpredictable policy. It also recounts how this reform failure has burdened honest consumers, led to blackouts despite surplus generation, and dragged down the economy. Numerous policy interventions, unbundling and corporatisation of SOEs, and private investments in generation notwithstanding, the sector continues to face challenges that constrain its efficiency and undermine its role in national economic growth, instead of providing relief to consumers across different categories.

In fact, the power sector's credibility is at its lowest point as even several policy resets have not been able to correct the situation. So, it is no surprise that whatever financial gains the state extracted from private power producers through coercion and renegotiation were quickly swallowed by deep-seated inefficiencies elsewhere in the system. No wonder, electricity remains unaffordable, supplies patchy and a big portion of generation capacity idle, with consumers forced to underwrite losses stemming from systemic failure. The scale of the sector's challenges and their implications for consumers is reflected in the fact that the distribution companies have added some Rs400bn to the circular debt, while consumers paid about Rs235bn in debt servicing surcharge during the last fiscal year because the sector's inefficiencies have been allowed to persist and cascade across the supply chain: from generation to transmission to distribution. Consumers are not only shouldering the financial burden of these inefficiencies, they are being forced to bear the costs of delayed connections and being overbilled. The Nepra report also admits that the regulator's own authority has diminished over time. Regulatory powers have been steadily eroded through administrative interference and prolonged litigation, rendering enforcement actions slow, reversible and largely symbolic. This raises an important question: can a sector plagued by weak governance and lack of accountability be fixed through pricing tweaks and contract revisions when experience suggests otherwise? The sector does not suffer from a lack of actionable plans for reform. What it needs is political will to execute those reform plans, improve governance and accountability, end policy uncertainty and strengthen the regulator.

Not quite Nobel

LET us make no mistake. Donald Trump has not received the Nobel Peace Prize. He has simply acquired the medal. This is akin to holding a friend's Oscar during a selfie and then captioning it 'great night'. The distinction, however, has never really troubled the American president, who had campaigned for the honour for years. He had listed his achievements numerous times, compared himself favourably to past winners and expressed bafflement that the committee kept missing the point — him. That pursuit was not subtle. President Trump spoke of the Nobel as something he had earned but been unfairly denied, a prize that history had misplaced. The grievance lingered, resurfacing whenever foreign policy or legacy came up. What irony then, that Mar a Corina Machado, the actual Nobel laureate, simply handed the medal to him. With the trophy now sitting on Mr Trump's desk, destiny must feel restored. The custodians of the prize were quick to clarify matters. The Norwegian Nobel Institute reminded everyone that the Nobel cannot be transferred, shared or quietly passed along. The medal may move. The honour stays put.

The natural question that arises then is, why hand over the cherished prize at all? For Ms Machado, the gesture is less about personal generosity than political leverage. Post-Maduro, Venezuela's future is being argued in Washington, and she arrived with an unusually shiny lobbying tool. It cost her nothing, and flattered him enormously, a rare bargain in diplomacy. Mr Trump has chosen to keep the medal, and although it is a symbolic prize, it implies responsibility. That means calm, restraint, and thinking before tweeting. No one is updating the laureates' list. No Oslo speech is pending. Still, now that peace is sitting on his desk, expectations may quietly follow. After all, it would be awkward to own the medal and then start a fight with it.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

Resistance network in Iran

The recent internal resistance has emboldened separatist elements in Arab and Kurdish regions.

IRAN'S clerical regime seems to have weathered yet another wave of internal resistance, exploited, as always, by its external rivals. But the human losses have left a deep new wound on the Iranian psyche. The immediate threat of a US-Israeli strike has also dispersed. Washington and Tel Aviv, backed by most Gulf capitals, recalibrated their stance after strategic assessments highlighted the danger of a wider regional war and the absence of any realistic plan for a post-regime change scenario.

Inside Iran, resistance against the establishment still struggles to form a unified front or leadership. However, this does not mean the US, Israel or their allies have dropped the goal of political change in Tehran. Instead, they are adjusting their methods. Media reports indicate the regime will not collapse quickly due to a strong security apparatus, loyal institutions, and backing from a sizable segment of the population.

Even so, external actors, along with internal resistance networks, are unlikely to allow the regime much time to fully recover from this crisis. Pressure is expected to persist, shifting from low to high intensity, to gradually soften the ground for change.

A key indicator that the ground is fertile for such a shift are the visible cracks within the Assembly of Experts (Majles-i-Khobregan-i-Rahbari), the Guardian Council (Shura-i-Negahban), and disputes within or between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the regular military (Artesh). All these critical institutions are still aligned with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's core strategic worldview, as one Iranian-origin expert noted.

To break the regime's coherence, external actors would not only seek to energise internal political resistance but also exploit other domestic fault lines, including fuelling dormant or active insurgencies. Analysts speculate that separatist and anti-clerical movements are concentrated in several key regions: Khuzestan province in the southwest, where many Arab Iranians harbour grievances; the western border areas, including Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan, where Kurdish separatists remain active; and, from a Pakistani perspective, the Baloch districts in Sistan-Baluchestan and parts of the Khorasan region, where anti-regime Baloch insurgent groups continue their operations.

As Vali Nasr explains in his latest book, *Iran's Grand Strategy*, the clerical regime's doctrine of 'forward defence', projecting power abroad to protect the state at home, can also be turned against Iran. Its adversaries can adopt the same approach to weaken the regime from within. Iran's enemies have already disrupted the Axis of Resistance, the network of Iranian regional proxies built around this forward defence strategy. The next step, as a few analysts suggest, could be the deployment or activation of proxies inside Iran itself.

If this occurs, the primary objective would be to draw the Iranian Revolutionary Guard into a deeper engagement on the internal front. An amalgam of political resistance and armed struggle can strain Iranian forces, especially when their proxies cannot come to their aid, as Iran's Axis of Resistance is weak and unable to provide any support.

These broader trends are now evident on the ground. Although reports suggest that the recent internal resistance has emboldened separatist elements in Arab and Kurdish regions, it is in the Sistan-Balochestan belt where several militant outfits have reportedly formed a stronger coalition to intensify their campaign against the Iranian state.

Jaishul Adl is a Baloch separatist group operating along the Iran-Pakistan border. It frequently targets Iranian security forces in Baloch-majority regions. The group now calls itself the People's Fighters Front (PFF). Three smaller militant outfits, the Nasr Movement, the Pada Baloch Movement, and the Muhammad Rasul Allah Group, have reportedly merged into this new organisation.

This rebranding is significant. By shedding its overtly religious identity, Jaishul Adl is attempting to project a more accommodative, secular nationalist profile that resonates better with the region's relatively moderate Baloch population. It also aligns the group's ideology with that of other nationalist insurgent movements, such as the terrorist Baloch organisations BLF and BLA and Kurdish groups like PJAK. Such a shift is also likely to make the organisation more eligible for support and funding from the Baloch and Iranian diaspora, as well as other external backers.

Strategically, the makeover aims to make the group acceptable to the West and the Arab world. It mirrors Abdolmalik Rigi's approach. He was the founder of a Baloch militant group in Iran and sought Western backing but failed, as the global war on terrorism was at its peak then.

This is a different time. If separatist groups inside Iran become more active, they might join forces with Baloch separatists in Pakistan, who have sharpened their skills. Some experts are unsure about this, arguing that the PFF has long been seen as Saudi-backed. Since Riyadh maintains strong ties with Pakistan, the alliance seems unlikely. But if the PFF has gained support from other external players, it could act with more strategic independence.

Baloch separatist groups on both sides of the border ultimately subscribe to the idea of a 'Greater Balochistan'. This concept spans regions of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, making cross-border cooperation a possibility.

If turmoil grows in Sistan-Baluchestan, many terrorist actors could get involved. These could include IS elements and militants who have left Ahmed al-Sharaa's networks in Syria. As this region is part of the Golden Crescent, a hub for drug trafficking and human smuggling, the ongoing instability could create a chaotic zone across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Any significant political shift in Iran will inevitably affect Pakistan with its broad geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences. While certain outcomes may offer limited strategic advantages for Pakistan, escalating instability along the Iran-Pakistan border would raise internal security pressures and could generate serious frictions with the regime in Tehran. ■

The writer is a security analyst

BY ABBAS NASIR

Relief as US puts off strikes

WHILE the US may want regime change in Iran, and Israel the collapse of the established order, internal strife and chaos, it appears that Tehran has stayed safe from US-led military strikes, for the time being at least, because any such action seems less imminent now than it did earlier this week.

Speculation abounds about what made US President Donald Trump change his mind — from entreaties by Gulf friends, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, to a seemingly bizarre *New York Times* report that claimed that the apartheid state's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also asked the US leader not to launch military strikes for the time being.

However, in Trump's own words "nobody" made him change his mind and it was the staying of 800 hangings of protesters that Iran had supposedly planned that was the main reason he had called off the strikes and also because the protesters' "killing has stopped".

Whatever led to the pause, temporary or permanent, it is a welcome development for the region, which seemed to be sliding towards strife, with worries in the Gulf about Iran's possible retaliatory missile strikes against American military bases and, who knows, even economic infrastructure such as oil and gas facilities.

Perhaps, the most serious challenges would have come Pakistan's way in either a regime change or collapse-chaos scenario. In the case of regime change, it would not have been surprising to see an administration in Tehran sympathetic to Israel. That would have meant a hostile entity like Israeli intelligence enjoying far greater access to Iran than, for example, Indian intelligence has at present.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons are like a sty in Israel's eye. And, therefore, you can well imagine the consequences of the latter's intelligence sitting on our nearly 1,000-kilometre border with Iran, adding to our existing security concerns due to the situation on the Indian and Afghan borders. Coastal security would be another concern.

In the other scenario, where a central authority collapse would lead to chaos and fragmentation, it would be reasonable to assume that Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province would be one of the regions affected by any such development, which, in turn, would lead to even more issues across our common, often porous, border.

With the same ethnicity straddling the border, you can well imagine the boost the insurgency in our Balochistan could get from the collapse of the central authority in Iran. Israel has enhanced its security through internal strife in Syria. It is the Mossad playbook for all states around it who are not in its pocket.

So, Pakistan can heave a sigh of relief that no further destabilisation has happened on the country's western borders and up the coast, in the short run at least. But Trump's decision to impose another 25 per cent tariff on anyone doing business with Iran will deepen the crisis in the sanctions-clamped nation.

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It was the economic crisis, with the rapidly falling value of the Iranian currency and inflation, that triggered the recent round of street protests. There can be no doubt that the Israeli intelligence service Mossad was involved in arming and instigating some of the protesters as the former CIA chief and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo openly tweeted, but the protests erupted due to the economic mess where even purchasing bread is becoming a problem.

This fact was acknowledged by Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said the government needed to address the legitimate concerns of the protesters who had a right to take to the streets. Now a new budget is expected to be presented before parliament to replace the earlier proposal rejected by it. But then, the protests turned violent and the security services were ordered to crack down.

Some Tehran-based sources say the protests were peaceful till some elements from among the protesters fired at the security forces and also attacked infrastructure. These sources claimed that, of the 2,000 people killed, some 700 were law-enforcement officers. But these claims were impossible to verify independently.

Trump's tariffs on top of sanctions could create further problems for the Iranian leadership as even the thus far recalcitrant India is having second thoughts about doing business with Iran and has pulled out of the Chabahar port project, which it saw as vital to expanding its trade ties all the way to Central Asia.

With the exception of China and Russia, additional US tariffs would be sufficient to discourage the smaller economies from trading with Iran, which would worsen the resource crunch in that country. The oppressive Iranian regime has some serious thinking to do over the coming weeks.

The immediate threat of US-Israeli military action may have receded somewhat but the economic crisis is going to worsen. Iran may consider easing restrictions on how women should be attired and create more space for peaceful expression of dissent as a means of reducing tensions within its society.

Side by side, it should consider what price tag it wants to attach to its nuclear programme. With its successful and lethal missile programme, it has already gained a degree of effective defence. Only Iran can tell if stopping its enrichment programme in exchange for lifting of sanctions and economic relief is worthwhile.

If its missile stockpile, particularly of the hypersonic variant, is what prompted many of its Gulf neighbours and, by some accounts, even Israel, to ask the US not to provoke it by attacking, Iran's defence shield seems to be working. Only the decision-makers in Tehran will know if that is enough or whether their pursuit of nuclear weapons is non-negotiable.

Their past experience of doing a deal with the Obama administration in 2015 to cap enrichment that Trump later annulled is not encouraging. Even then, it's not clear what other options a country facing economic ruin and internal strife can exercise. ■

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